

WGUMC Palm Sunday March 24, 2013 “Cloaks on the Road”  
Matthew 21:1-11

I invite you to imagine the scene: Jerusalem, Passover, circa 30 A.D. The year-round population is somewhere between 40,000 and 80,000. No one knows for sure. But on the Passover, the population swells to well over 100,000. Maybe 200,000. On 450 acres of land. Imagine: no Port A Potties. There are thousands of pilgrims coming into the city, and two processions.

There’s a Roman parade coming from the West, coming from the Roman headquarters in Caesarea. The Roman Governor, Pontius Pilate is at the head of that parade. He brings soldiers with him to beef up security for the Passover. There’s always trouble brewing at Passover. It is, after all, the celebration of the Jews’ military victory over an imperial power: Egypt. The lesson is not lost on Imperial Rome. Thirty years before, there had been a rebellion during the festival. The

Romans killed 3,000. Pilate comes to Passover to enforce the peace, with violence if necessary.

But there's another procession in Jerusalem this Passover, coming from the East. It's a man on a donkey. The people are waving palm branches and singing "Hosanna to the Son of David" and treating him like a peasant king. Pilate comes on a war horse. Jesus comes on a donkey. It's political theater of the highest order. The crowd eats it up. They love Jesus. They want to welcome the Lord of Life. They want to roll out the red carpet. But they have no red carpet, so they take off their own cloaks and lay them on the road. Their cloak may be the only thing they own. It's their way of saying, "I give it all to you."

Then as now, our garments say a lot about who we are and whose we are. Cloaks were made from different fibers, different colors, a different weave. Some were symbols of power and privilege. Some were symbols of poverty and oppression.

But, whatever cloak we wear, it's just the outside of us. In some sense it covers up who we really are. If we want to be authentic with Jesus, we're going to have to shed our cloaks. If we want to be in the Jesus parade, we have to give up whatever it is that labels us in order to follow the one who loves us.

Think of all the cloaks we wear that keep folks from seeing who we really are, keep us from being who we really are. Today, I want us to imagine laying down those cloaks in order to welcome Jesus into Jerusalem.

First, there's the cloak of power. Pilate couldn't lay down that cloak. He was too obsessed with his power and trying hard to hold onto it. He was appointed to his position and he could easily lose it. The people had to fear him enough to obey him but not enough to rebel against him. It was a balancing act, and Pilate did everything he could to stay in control.

He was about as good at that as any modern-day Middle Eastern tyrant. They are not as much in control as anyone thought.

We may not have delusions of that kind of power, but most of us are in a losing battle to control our lives. Whether we are a head of a company or the head of a family, we don't have any more control over our lives than Pilate had over Palestine. Anything can happen: job loss, divorce, diagnosis, natural disasters. And they can happen all at once!

If we want to join the parade of the one who emptied himself of his power to take on the form of a slave, then we have to lay down the cloak of power. [I lay down Pilate's robe in the center aisle.]

Next, we have the cloak of privilege. The high priest was appointed by the Roman Governor. It was a prestigious position. It was a lucrative contract. The temple was run by a huge bureaucracy. Lots of opportunities to make money. Remember

this sacred place was also a marketplace. So think of the temple as the Vatican and Wall Street rolled into one.

The temple system was working for them. To have Jesus come in and prophesy the destruction of the temple was not only a threat against a building. It was an attack on the system of privilege.

We are privileged to live in one of the wealthiest counties in the wealthiest country on earth. How's the system working for you? One thing the recession taught us: you can't rely on the system. We've seen how systems were built by powerful people and how they were nearly destroyed by them. Living in Silicon Valley doesn't protect you from that. It doesn't mean that you can hold onto your house or pay for health insurance or fill up your gas tank.

If we want to follow the guy who had no privileges—foxes have holes, the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man

has nowhere to lay his head—we'll have to give up our cloak of privilege. [I lay down the chief priest's robe.]

Now we have the cloak of piety. The Pharisees were outsiders to the temple system. They were opposed to the temple hierarchy. They were disgusted by all the corruption. They wanted to purify their religion. And like many reformers, they were oh so right and oh so righteous. Because they built the pedestal so high, they were almost sure to fall off it. The one who blessed the spiritually poor didn't like their spiritual pride.

And he tells us that if we want the church to survive today, we have to stop acting like we're always right and that we have a corner on righteousness. Some churches do just that and seem to be successful. But not for long. Trends show that they are losing the 20-somethings despite their rock bands. Young people today don't buy their certainty.

If we want to join the parade, we're going to have to give up our sense of superiority and tolerate much more ambiguity and embrace the mystery. In other words, we'll have to enter the kingdom as a little child would enter, not knowing everything, not demanding that everyone recite a certain creed or adhere to certain rules or worship in a certain way or sing only certain songs. We have to lay down the cloak of piety. Just as I am, without one plea. [I lay down my doctoral gown.]

What about the cloak of political purity? The Zealots were a group that opposed Rome and always on the lookout for opportunities to take revenge. Their Messiah would be a military leader. They wanted to take Jesus and make him a king. Jesus didn't want to be that kind of king. "My kingdom is not of this world," he told Pilate. He didn't deny he was a king, but he wasn't the kind of king that could be crowned by armies or conquered by them. When he rode into Jerusalem on a donkey, he was making everyone remember the passage in Zechariah:

“Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey. He will cut off the chariot from Ephraim and the war horse from Jerusalem; and the battle bow shall be cut off, and he shall command peace to the nations...”

Neither of our political parties in this country are commanding peace to the nations. And I don't see many Christians making peace, either. While politicians send us into foreign wars, church people engage in culture wars. Christians don't seem to have any better idea than the politicians do what the Bible means when it says that Christ is our peace and has broken down every dividing wall. As a country and as the church, we're going to have to wrestle with what it would really mean to follow the Prince of Peace. We're going to have to put down the cloak of our political purity. [I lay down a plain robe. I'm almost to the front of the sanctuary now.]



To join the Jesus parade, we have to lay down our cloaks of power, of privilege, of piety and of ideology. Because all those cloaks give us a false and dangerous sense of security.

But let's face it. Most of the folks in the crowd that day had little power, little privilege, not much piety, and couldn't give a rip about political ideology. The ones who were wearing those cloaks were over at the Pilate parade. Yet, these humble folk, some had followed Jesus a long way. With nothing to lose and heaven to gain, they lay down their cloaks because they were ready to lay down their lives. They weren't the ones who would crowd into the headquarters of Pilate and demand that he be crucified (they never would have been allowed in there; the ones crying for blood were the high priest and his cronies). They were the ones who would stand at a distance and watch the soldiers cast lots for Jesus' clothes. Then they watched their Lord die.

Those of us who want to get to Easter Sunday, have to get there by way of Good Friday. We have to lay down the last cloak of all, our denial of reality. We have such a hard time accepting our mortality. But, as Archbishop Tutu says, death is not the worst thing that can happen to a Christian. And we can't experience resurrection unless we face the crucifixion. St. Paul says, "For if we have been united with him a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his." [Romans 6:5] Only after laying down this last cloak can we join the parade that leads to Calvary. We don't know it yet, but it's a parade that will lead all the way to eternity. And this road to Zion begins here, in our hearts. [I lay down a black cape and Tom Mounts sings "The Road to Zion."]